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ABSTRACT

To ensure optimum utilization of filmmaking resources, the manager of an inhouse film unit should: (1) develop a broad perspective of his duties; (2) select personnel compatible with the goals of the organization, taking special care in choosing the film designer; (3) set time schedules which permit quality production; (4) arrange appropriate support contracts; and (5) provide adequate space and equipment. (EMH)

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THE INFORMATION FILM MANAGER--THE RESOURCE PROVIDER

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the primary duty of the manager of the in-house film unit, to provide and maintain the resources needed for the group to produce films. These resources are looked at, not in monetary terms, but rather as assets to be developed, nurtured, and used with judicious care.

INTRODUCTION

The primary responsibility of the manager of an in-house film group is to provide the resources necessary for the group to get its job done. This job, typically, is the creative process of solving communication problems with films. Because of the unique circumstances of individual in-house film groups, any listing of these resources must be incomplete and it will contain some that are not germane. However, those I've found to have special importance are people (talent), time, contractor support, space, equipment, and administration. These resources are identified then as the wherewithal needed by the group to accomplish its goals--filmmaking. Implicit in this listing is the funding needed to provide and maintain these resources.

It follows, then, that the manager's ancillary duty is to insure optimum utilization of these resources in the filmmaking process. For most films, there is a certain level of resource expenditure that, if used with judicious care, will effect a satisfactory solution to the communication problem. Additional resource expenditures, by and large, do not contribute much to ease of audience understanding. Rather this adds mostly superfluous gloss that tends to mask and distort the communication goals.

THE RESOURCES

All too frequently managers do not understand fully their responsibilities in terms of the "resource provider". Rather they tend to concentrate on duties, albeit important, that most likely are

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included in the overall concept of resources but are narrower in scope; for example, quality control, goal setting, discipline, group image, and fiscal details.

Understandably, in some organizations it is upper management that sets a narrow direction and tone for the first-line manager to follow in his day-to-day operations. The manager, then, concentrates on those areas that he believes to be "boss pleasing" much to the detriment of the group's welfare. I am suggesting, however, that even under strict dicta, the manager can broaden his focus and over a time develop a more comprehensive perspective of his duties as a resource provider. In this discussion on resources I don't pretend to offer a panacea—but rather to share a few ideas that have proven highly successful for me.

People

People are the first resource a manager must consider. He needs to look at the professionals and craftsmen in terms of talent, motivation, and industry—the spark and fuel of his organization. His task is to ensure these attributes are nutured, cultivated, and maintained.

This responsibility begins with recruiting—a much neglected and relegated duty that more often than not is accomplished by happenstance without a long-term goal. Yet recruiting is the very foundation of the people resource. It is understandable why many managers give only cursory service to this task—a task that smacks of slave trading. If done properly, it consumes a vast amount of time in planning, execution, and follow-through; it frequently requires travel; it needs to be conducted with consummate tact and marked deftness; it demands incisive insight and ruthless objectivity. This kind of effort garners an overall return that is immense, almost immeasurable.

The manager should analyze his recruiting objectives in relation to long-term goals, not usually for just the immediate need. What does he want the new employee to be doing in one year, five years, ten years? Does the job have growth potential; if not, can it be made so; should it be made so? The manager should recruit for the potential of the prospective employee to fulfill an expanded growth in the job.

It's common to hear managers say something like "with the glut of film people of all types on the market today one can hire an editor (or whatever) anytime, anyplace". This is true. But I also believe it to be myopic.

As the manager of a small in-house film group, I've found our best people resource is the multitalented filmmaker–the film designer,[1] who is a combined producer, writer, director, editor! The film designer is a person who has developed professionally into this total responsibility concept–obviously a special person not easily come by.

I've had the most success in fulfilling the long-term people goal by recruiting recent graduates with advanced degrees in cinema from the recognized film schools, USC and UCLA in particular. The traits I look for in recruiting are inherent talent, motivation, work ethic, and how well the prospective employee will fit into the group. Experience, by-and-large, is little considered.

Admittedly, at best, candidate selection is mostly a subjective educated guess. But, done with judicious care, the manager usually will make a good selection; maybe not the best, but one that is clearly from the top few.

The manager's next task is to develop, train, and motivate the new employee to achieve the level of professional development set in the long-term goal. This is a highly complicated, multifaceted task frought with pitfalls and with no ready solutions.

In general, however, the manager needs to establish a creative atmosphere where new ideas are encouraged and flourish. The new employee must be given assignments that are varied, challenging, and of constantly increasing responsibility encompassing, over a time, all the film crafts. These assignments should be made, in consonance with the group's work load, at a pace slightly faster than the manager believes the employee can reasonably handle.

Within my experience, it takes about three years for development of a fully qualified film designer from an advanced-degree graduate in cinema. At this point in his professional development the film designer can perform satisfactorily any film craft, and he generally excels in several. He can analyze communication problems quickly and effect a solution with best economy of resources. He can act independently or in support of others in whatever task is required. I am convinced that a cadre of this professional talent is essential for the success of an in-house film unit.

So far, I've not addressed the people resource in terms of the technician or administrative support types. This is a subject worthy of a separate treatise. Briefly however, it is a serious error not to recognize just how essential these talents are to the success of the group. The problems of

[1] S. Martin Shelton. *A Writer Is a Writer Is a Writer–But a Film Writer Should be More*. 21st International Technical Communications Conference, 15-18 May 1974, St. Louis, Missouri.

recruiting and development approximate those of the film designer, but to a lesser degree.

Time

Time is the next most important resource–time to get the job done satisfactorily with reasonable economy of all resources. The manager's task is to ensure, as much as possible, that enough time is allocated for the task. Unfortunately, this is the one resource over which the manager has least control. However, he can ferret out the short deadlines that are set falsely by overanxious clients who want excessive lead time; and he can establish realistic due dates.

The manager next should establish and direct a time-management program; that is, ensure that the time available is used efficiently. Since time is such a deceptively complex resource, there is no easy definition of "efficiency". I would like, however, to share a few observations from my experience.

The laws of physics and human nature being as they are, the time available to do the job determines the pace of the work and the workers; that is, the work will get done in the time alloted, be it short, normal (routine), or long.[2]

All factors considered, the routine film is the most economical in terms of rate of return for resources expended and in overall job satisfaction. The film designer has enough time to plan and create, and he has enough time to execute carefully all of the film elements. Yet there is not enough time for any film element to atrophy. The elapsed time, from statement of the communication problem to answer print, is short enough for the film designer to have a fresh and comprehensive view of the entire process.

One caution needs to be considered. The manager must prevent the routine film from becoming the job that is just worked on when there is nothing else to do. The routine film has an inherent priority that must be honored. Develop a schedule with a fixed deadline–and hold to it.

Long Lead Time. Often, I've found a long lead time, especially when excessive to the total time needed to produce the film, results in a major increase in resource expenditure with little additional return. In fact, of all the time allocations this is the most expensive. Long lead time dulls the sharp edge of incisive thinking and efficient work ethic. Things are postponed, or replanned, or done over repeatedly; lack of decisiveness reigns in an attempt to achieve the ultimate

[2] C. Northcote Parkinson, *Parkinson's Law*, Ballantine Books, New York, New York, 1957, 140 p.

perfection–creativity wanes. It is axiomatic that the more time available the more complex and important the job becomes (see Footnote 2).

Crash Schedules. Those film productions that have short (inadequate) lead times present some special problems. Generally, those films are much more expensive and less creative than routine ones. Large blocks of inefficient but expensive overtime are used. Normal economics are skipped in the interest of time; for example, personal messenger service is used instead of the mail. Falsely, more talent in terms of quantity and quality are employed in all facets of production for greater "efficiency." Contingency options of all kinds are covered in anticipation of need or trouble. And that which should be polished or done over is accepted in the interest of getting the job done.

Sometimes the side effects of this kind of *crash* effort can be devastating; group morale and team spirit suffer as normal office amenities are short-circuited; tempers rise, egos are twinged, and better judgment fails. Equally important, other work in the group is put aside, and either its deadline is missed or it in turn becomes a crash project in an attempt to recoup lost time–a self-defeating process.

On the other hand, some fecund advantages are derived in effecting a rapid response to communication needs. Operating under the pressure of the short deadline offers unique opportunities for professional growth. This can be the catalyst needed to build team elan among the group. It demands creative and physical discipline from all who participate, but especially from the film designer. He is forced to analyze trenchantly and quickly the communication problem in terms of need, film goals, and target audience. He must concentrate on the essential elements of information to effect a satisfactory solution with the least expenditure of resources. In this sharp decision process all else is excluded as unnecessary or too expensive in terms of the time resource.

Contract Support

Superior contractor support is essential for the in-house film group if it is to produce state-of-the-art films in a professional and timely manner–sophisticated films that utilize the total scope of the media in solving communication problems. In today's austere business climate (and I suspect as far into the future as one can see) where fiscal acumen, progressive management, and overall contribution and responsiveness are the measure of an organization's success and reason for continued existence. No film group, in-house or not, can support successfully a complete production or laboratory capability or any major portion thereof.

Over the past few years, I've found more and more film groups are concentrating their limited resources in the communication solving functions: producing, writing, directing, and editing; and in contract management. Increasingly, contract support is used for the technical and craftsman functions: camera, sound, art/animation, special effects, original conforming, and laboratory services.

It is outside the pale of reason for a film group to attempt to achieve more than a small token of this total capability. Yet all too often the group tries for *more* in the mistaken conviction that "in-house is better." Disaster is ensured.

Extensive commitment to in-house production capability is too complex. It is a voracious consumer of scarce resources. It demands a myriad of full-time specialized talent, working with highly sophisticated, expertly maintained equipment in expensive space. But this is precisely what good contract support can provide. It also provides for flexible manpower loading necessary to respond to widely varying work loads for these different skills throughout the year.

Anything approaching this extensive in-house effort is a gross overcommitment of resources on functions which are noncommunication problem solving. The group bogs down in the incessant and increasing expenditure of overhead (nonproductive) resources needed to keep the effort viable year-round. It is inevitable that the probem solving talent becomes consumed in performing work that requires lesser skill levels. Frequently this is very pronounced; for example, a film designer conforming original or editing sound effects. Clearly this is a misuse of resources, and it contributes materially to that ever tightening stranglehold of increasing overhead and reduced production.

The manager's task is to develop, let, and administer a series of viable contracts with expert speciality houses that are professionally responsive to the group's needs at reasonable cost. This is no easy or quick task. Sometimes it's taken me over seven months to get a contract such as this in effect—having to conduct comprehensive preaward surveys on each bidder meeting the specifications. But once let and working, these contracts were worth the effort in every sense of the word. These contracts realize significant advantages in terms of increased professionalism and decreased operating cost.

From the contractor's viewpoint, these contracts must be profitable—monetarily and professionally. They must also be simple—simple to understand, simple to administer, and simple to comply with. That is, the work statement must pinpoint the exact services and materials required and no more, within a specific and reasonable time frame. Usually, our specialty contracts have, on

average, only 20 line items. This is an exponential reduction from most government audiovisual contracts I've seen.

One contractor put it this way in response to a request for a bid from a government agency, "...The resulting proliferation of documents, addenda, declarations, and self-supporting regulations vomited forth in that effort is without merit, logic, or adequate word description."[3] Yet in a parrying self-defense, some of this complexity is necessary because many agencies require awarding audiovisual contracts on a strictly low bid. This can result in awarding of contracts to unqualified, unprofessional firms (not necessarily film houses); and in contract overruns.[4]

Space

The space resource encompasses much more than the minimum square footage needed to house the group's talent and their equipment. It defines space in terms of human and environmental factors and in its efficient use.

Every person needs to have his own space, furniture, and attendant office paraphernalia. This in many ways is akin to Linus' blanket. It not only offers a security symbol, it is security—perhaps more than the paycheck or plaudits from the manager. To demonstrate this principle, try someday unannounced to change office assignments and/or to rearrange the office furniture.

In many ways the entire space resource is negative in tone. Admittedly, good and efficient space has a positive impact on the group's output; little is said, and the work goes on. But if any of the factors go awry, the hue and cry will stifle the group's entire effort until it is put right.

The manager needs to concentrate first on the human factors of the space resource. The space needs to be large enough to prevent crowding, physical or mental. It needs to be designed, decorated, and furnished for reasonable comfort and provided with good telephonic communications. It must afford enough privacy to encourage creative thinking and allow for guilt-free (private) "goofing off."

The environmental factors of heat, air conditioning, light, humidity, power, security, and safety must be provided and controlled to the degree that their presence or absence is not noticed. And the

[3] Jack Williamson quoted in "No Bid," *Business Screen*, May/June, 1974, pp. 34-35.
[4] Charles C. Joyce Jr., *Audio-Visual Communications in the Federal Government*, Report of the Interagency Audio-Visual Study Group, Office of Telecommunications Policy, January, 1974.

space must be maintained with efficient janitorial service, repair, and upkeep.

The manager must also decide on the kind of space and the amount of space that the group needs to produce its films effectively and that can be supported from its overhead. Again, the question must be put, What is the most efficient in terms of resource expenditures? My experience has been to provide just the space resource that is used actively in support of our small cadre. Space that we need on an occassional basis is rented; for example, sound stages, recording studios, editing rooms, and projection rooms. Inefficiently or seldom used space is a serious drain on any group's overhead—reducing proportionally all other resources.

Equipment

The equipment resource is defined as the hardware needed by the group to get its job done—hardware owned or rented. And it includes equipment maintenance and repair, done in-house or on contract. Office equipment and furniture are included in the space resource.

Generally, an equipment resource purchase must be considered as a capital investment, and as such it must be considered carefully. Again, a "nonprofitable" expenditure taps the life blood from all other resources. To get good return on the investment the equipment must be able to get the job done professionally, must be used frequently, must be reliable, must be easily maintainable and must be the optimum buy. If these conditions are met, the purchase is valid. If not, the best return is realized by leasing or renting from a reliable firm that will provide maintenance and repair.

I'll not discuss what type of equipment or brand names to use, buy, or rent. But the manager, as the resource provider, must ensure that the group has those resources *needed* to get its job done efficiently—a job with constantly changing requirements. Little if any resource should be expended on "nice to have," and none on that which gathers dust. Some backup resource should be available to cover those extra crash tasks and as a substitute for the primary equipment when it is down for maintenance or repair.

Lastly, the equipment must work when needed. This can be ensured by rigorously following a scheduled preventive maintenance program; and by developing quick and reliable access to expert, fully equipped repairmen who are responsive to needs on short notice.

Administration

Within my frame of reference, the administration resource encompasses all the support and management services the group needs to keep it running smoothly. This includes, at the group level,

clerical and typing support, payroll, transportation, mail, library support, and a myriad of other services–most of which we don't think about very much. Also included at the group level, but contributed directly by the manager, are goal setting, quality control, promotion and awards, discipline, formal training and professional development, interpretation and implementation of company policy, work assignments, securing work for the group, distribution of the group's products, and ensuring continued support by upper management. Again, this list is not intended to be all inclusive, but rather is intended to mention some administration considerations from my experience.

Too many managers take the administration resource for granted; many do not recognize it as a resource, and others pay it only scant attention until some facet bogs down–then the crash fix is on. This low-profile yet critically important resource must be nurtured and developed as keenly as any other resource or else the group's efficiency will fall off quickly. I've found that poor administration kills a group's initiative and industry quicker than anything else. And only good administration will set it right.

INVENTORY

The manager of the in-house film group should consider taking an inventory of the resources his group uses as to type, quantity, and quality. He should determine those resources his group *needs* to get its job done better–resources the group does not have or use. He should analyze his role as manager and his contribution to the group as the resource provider. Clearly, this discussion applies to a specific organizational unit, but the theme can be adapted to most situations and the innovative manager can develop a viable plan to suit his particular needs.